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## Introduction

When my grandfather was a little boy, he was taken to see Queen Victoria when she visited Dublin in 1900. What excitement! As a towering mythic symbol, Victoria summed up an age and an ethos, a period spanning several generations, an empire that encircled the globe. On the day, however, my grandfather was sadly disillusioned. Instead of a commanding monarch, magnificent in crown, robes of state and sceptre, he glimpsed a tiny, stout figure in the carriage – a little serious and unbending, perhaps, but a woman who could have been anyone's widowed great-grandmother. My grandfather's experience seems an apt metaphor for the Victorian self-image. This was a society that simultaneously celebrated and disappointed itself, and that tension colours all aspects of Victorian culture, including its literary output. It also shapes how we understand that era today.

Queen Victoria's lengthy reign – from 1837 to 1901 – was shaped, at the start, by the legacy of radical Romanticism\* and the Industrial Revolution and, at the end, by the possibilities of a new century. Representing a whole culture by the name of a single individual suggests it had a distinctive, uniform character; but it also signifies some of the core ideals of nineteenth-century Britain. Victorians valued stability, tradition, authority and grandeur in public life; so it is fitting that their culture is symbolically allied with the hereditary monarch, head of the most powerful nation of the day.

\* Terms in bold indicate that they can be found in the Glossary, p.142.

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Additionally, the strong identification with the Queen, who consciously portrayed herself as wife, mother and grieving widow, reminds us that Victorians imagined their society as a harmonious 'family', sustained by decency and sympathy, by duty and respect. Over a century later, we use the designation 'Victorian' to describe a period of literary and historical study – but also a complex culture. Like the double-exposure encapsulated in my grandfather's childhood memory, there is a gap between the period's self-projection as confident, accomplished and 'proper', and its untidy reality, marked by insecurity and doubt arising from vast social and intellectual change.

Of course, a distinctive cultural outlook does not suddenly begin and cease. Well before 1837, we can track ideas and events that seem characteristically 'Victorian', including, for example, an interest in social reform and the rights of the individual. The Victorian commitment to social improvement and democratization is anticipated in the 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act, which restored civil liberties to a significant minority, and in the 1832 Reform Act, which (modestly) extended the franchise. Similarly, the twentieth-century rebellion against Victorian artistic conventions and moral strictures was already well entrenched in certain avant-garde circles by the 1890s. Moreover, Victoria's reign was so long that it actually covered three generations, each with differing assumptions, worries and aspirations. Current scholarship employs loose but distinct subdivisions when defining the Victorian era: early, mid (or high) and late. While there are overlaps between these categories, each can be characterized by distinct attitudes. The Victorian period is a flexible framework marked by continuities, innovation and diversity.

'Early Victorian' culture, extending roughly to 1850, energetically embraced – even forced – changes, but, equally energetically, struggled to maintain a stable consensus about individual and communal purpose. Throughout this time of agitation and reform, fear of social unrest and economic instability appeared in public discourse and cultural products. An increasingly vocal working class, depressed markets,

fierce competition and a significant influx of the foreign unemployed (including Irish immigrants) provoked concern about the condition of the country and the kinds of authority that should shape personal beliefs, social structure and behaviour. From the late 1830s, the prosperous middle class dominated this debate, enforcing *its* values as the means of satisfying both individual aspirations and the needs of the nation.

Between 1850 and the 1870s, 'high' or 'mid-Victorian' culture, with its devotion to the advancement of both individual and state, also evidenced the authoritative imprint of the middle class. Economic success and intellectual achievements, particularly those linked to industry, consolidated the power and status of the bourgeoisie. Middle-class devotion to individualism and a fervent Evangelical Christianity were systematically embedded in cultural practices, ranging from the 'natural' laws of free-market economics to guidebooks on self-help. Simultaneously, technological developments and social reforms improved the quality of life and supported a comforting sense of progress that benefited all. Yet, mid-Victorian controversies periodically undermined confidence. Unchecked urban expansion (creating problems of public health and crime), scientific developments (such as Darwin's theory of evolution) and scholarly research (like the historical analysis of religious texts) challenged orthodox convictions, both religious and secular.

The 'late Victorian' period inherited this contradictory mix of cultural assurance and self-doubt, but reimagined it as a battle between the outmoded values of the Victorian past and the rebellious, liberating possibilities of a more modern outlook. Of course, identity for many still depended on traditional moral and religious principles and codes of social conduct. However, a number of artists and intellectuals challenged the assumptions of previous generations, rejecting orthodox religious belief, mainstream models of gender and sexuality, and established artistic conventions. Instead, they reshaped the final years of Victoria's reign into a time of nervous but creative anticipation of a new century.

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However, these trends are not the only continuities and discontinuities that permeate Victorian culture. Whatever the idealized rhetoric, no complex society is a single cohesive entity. Middle-class ideas certainly prevailed in the shaping of the country's self-image throughout the period. In public and private life – the sphere of the marketplace and the sphere of the home – aspirations and values reflect a bourgeois interpretation of experience. The importance of work, the individual's responsibility for self-improvement, the distinct and separate roles for men and women and the earnest commitment to duty commensurate with one's social place: these are just some of the middle-class principles that underpin Victorian social structures and artistic output. However, these viewpoints do need to be seen alongside the distinctive upper- and working-class cultures with which the middle class intersected – and competed.

Victorian literature was central to the struggle for cultural authority between different class-based value systems. Mainstream literary genres often implied a distinctively middle-class construction of social experience and individual identity. Novelists like Charles Dickens (1812–70) and Elizabeth Gaskell (1810–65) revealed the suffering of the underprivileged, but they indirectly downplayed the particular perspectives of the working class by promoting a romanticized vision of class collaboration and harmony. Their narratives typically allocate the heroic, active role to characters that demonstrate middle-class attitudes, whatever the apparent circumstances of their birth. As current literary scholarship indicates, these bourgeois perspectives masquerade as eternal truths in much Victorian writing and are embedded in the genres, narrative techniques and vocabulary of literary works, not simply in subject matter.

Although middle-class ideologies pervaded mainstream culture, their contradictions were uncomfortably apparent, even to Victorians. Nineteenth-century society firmly policed the boundaries of 'normal' identity with respect to gender and sexuality, nationhood, class and race. However, cultural differences were highly visible and often troubling. Unrest in

the Empire suggested British civilization was not always welcomed as beneficial. Inflexible codes of respectability sat awkwardly with modern concepts of individualism and self-fulfilment. The conflict between personal self-expression and social orthodoxy, between autonomy and dutiful submission to authority, became increasingly difficult to resolve. Equally as hard to sustain was the popular Victorian image of a modern Britain with opportunities for the hard working. It was impossible to ignore the vast inequalities between those who had much and those who had nothing. Although the rhetoric of social mobility and progress implied merit would be rewarded, the reality was different. For many, the ideals of self-help and self-reliance translated into a constant stressful effort to escape, or at least retard, social decline in a brutal, competitive climate. Others worked the system with amoral gusto, sacrificing principles in order to 'get on'.

Aware of such tensions, we can no longer view the age as old-fashioned, conservative, or even simply repressed and hypocritical. Victorian culture, including its literature, was a dynamic, highly self-conscious and fiercely contested imagined space. New fields of knowledge, the great public institutions, personal belief systems and demanding social expectations presented both possibilities *and* drawbacks. As this book will go on to suggest, these hubs of power all advanced conflicting claims for an individual's attention and allegiance. All impacted on the ways Victorians saw and wrote about their world. The writer Henry James (1843–1916) once reflected on the difficulty of deciphering nineteenth-century novels, those 'loose, baggy monsters', as he termed them (1935: 84). In many ways, the story of Victorian literature and culture is also a narrative about interpretation – the struggle of a nation to give meaning and purpose to the loose, baggy monster that constituted its world.

